

## NATURALLY SPEAKING Herbs act like medicines in the body



One in three Americans uses herbal remedies to manage the symptoms of illness and improve health. In general, experts agree that herbals are milder and safer than prescription drugs. But herbals act like medicines in the body. They can cause problems if too much is taken, if used too long, or if taken with certain medicines.

For example, ginseng can cause problems if taken with **Coumadin** (**warfarin**) or **Lanoxin** (**digoxin**). One man who was taking **warfarin** to prevent blood clots was doing well for many months. But when he started taking ginseng, his blood tests showed that he could have serious bleeding. When he stopped taking the ginseng, his blood tests returned to the desired levels without needing to change his dose of **warfarin**. Another patient with heart problems had been taking the same dose of **digoxin** for years. Then, all of a sudden, his tests showed that he had too much medicine in his

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blood. This could make his heart beat too slowly. The doctors could not find a reason for this until the man said he had started taking ginseng. His blood test returned to normal shortly after he stopped taking the ginseng.

Another problem with herbals is worth mentioning. Unlike traditional medicines, herbals do not have to be

tested to make sure they are safe and effective.

This limits our ability to know whether they could be harmful and what they can and can't do. It also allows the sellers of

herbals to make claims about their use that may or may not be true.

In 1998, *The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine* was formed to look at herbals scientifically. Today, reliable research is underway on this promising means to help manage your health. See **Check it out!** in the right column for tips on how to use herbals safely.

### **Check it out!**

To use herbals safely:

✓ **Get to know your herbals.** Learn about the benefits as well as the risks and side effects of herbals you take. You can get information from your pharmacist, a reliable website (e.g., [www.mskcc.org/aboutherbs](http://www.mskcc.org/aboutherbs)), or from a book on herbals.

✓ **Report herbal use.** Don't be afraid to tell your doctors, nurses, and pharmacists about herbals you take, even if you are well. It may change the choice of a medicine your doctor prescribes for you, and allow your caregivers to give you advice on which herbals to stop while taking other medicines. If you become sick, telling your doctor about herbals you take might help to determine the cause of your illness.

✓ **Stop before surgery.** Some herbals can change the effects of medicines used during surgery or cause you to bleed (especially those that begin with "g" such as garlic, ginger, ginseng, and ginkgo). Always check with your doctor, but it's a good idea to stop herbals at least 1 week before surgery.

✓ **See a doctor.** Taking an herbal to treat ongoing symptoms like pain, fatigue, or a persistent rash may seem like a good idea. But don't let it keep you from seeking medical help. Herbals may help relieve symptoms, but not cure the illness. A delay in medical treatment could have serious consequences.

## 60 second **safety tips**

■ **Don't warm your patches!** Some medicines are supplied in patches that you apply to your skin. The medicine reaches your body by going through the blood vessels in your skin. If you warm your skin, it gets red because the blood vessels widen. The wider your blood vessels are, the more medicine your body absorbs. Warming your skin with heating pads or with lots of physical activity can cause too much medicine in the patch to be absorbed. This is especially dangerous when using patches

continued on page 2 ►

► Brand name medicines appear in **green**; generic medicines appear in **red**.

## Do you know...

...what you are signing when you pick up your medicine?



Do you know what you are signing every time you pick up a prescription at a pharmacy? Your signature may not merely verify that you have received your prescription. It could also mean you do *not* want to talk to a pharmacist about your medicine. You should always be offered an opportunity to speak to a pharmacist when you pick up a prescription. Ideally, you would be asked if you would like to talk to a pharmacist to get all the information you need to take your medicine safely. But in the real world, customers may simply be asked, "Do you have any questions?" Most quickly answer "no." If it's a new medicine, you may not be able to think of any questions just yet. If it's a refill, you might believe you know all you need to know. But consider this:

**Up to half of all people take their medicines incorrectly because they do not know something important about their medicine.**

It could be something as simple as the best time of day to take the medicine, or as basic as how to measure the dose of a liquid medicine correctly. You may not know that you should not lie down for an hour after taking some medicines, or that others should never be chewed. The details about your medicine are important. If you don't talk to a pharmacist, you may miss an opportunity to learn the answers to the questions that usually surface after you've been taking the medicine for a few days or even months. Getting answers beforehand can save you trouble in the long run.

You can talk to a pharmacist at any time about your medicines. But be sure to take advantage of this when picking up prescriptions. When asked, "Do you have any questions?" say "Is there anything special I should know about this?" - especially if it's a new medicine. Don't sign away a free consultation with your pharmacist!

## 60 second safety tips continued from page 2

that relieve pain. One woman was wearing a **Duragesic (fentanyl)** patch for cancer pain. She used a heating pad on her abdomen, which accidentally slid to the side and covered the patch. Several hours later, she was found unconscious and breathing very slowly from too much medicine being absorbed. Another young man was wearing the same kind of patch. He went swimming and hiking one day, making his body very warm. He became tired and eventually became unconscious. Both patients were treated in the emergency department and then allowed to go home. If you wear any type of medication patch, be careful not to place a heating pad or electric blanket over it. Also take care when exercising or doing physical tasks such as raking leaves or shoveling snow.

## Playing hide and seek with acetaminophen



Did you know that adults should take no more than 4,000 milligrams (mg) of **acetaminophen** each day? (You may recognize this medicine better by one of its brand names, **Tylenol**.) This is equal to 8 **Extra Strength Tylenol** tablets (500 mg each) taken over 24 hours. Children should take even less, and so should adults who drink alcoholic beverages daily (ask your doctor or pharmacist). Taking too much of this medicine every day for several days can lead to liver and brain damage, and even death.

If you are taking more than one medicine for pain, colds, or sleep, you might be taking more **acetaminophen** than you think! **Acetaminophen** may be hiding in other medicines that are not called **Tylenol**. For instance, each tablet of **Excedrin Extra Strength** contains **acetaminophen** 250 mg (as well as aspirin). **Alka-Seltzer Plus Cold Liqui-Gels** contain 250 mg of **acetaminophen**. Even **Triaminic Sore Throat Formula Liquid** has 160 mg of **acetaminophen** in each dose!

**Acetaminophen** may also be one of several ingredients in common prescription pain medicines like:

- **Vicodin** (500 mg or 750 mg of **acetaminophen** with another pain medicine, **hydrocodone**, in each tablet)
- **Darvocet N-100** (650 mg of **acetaminophen** with another pain medicine, **propoxyphene**, in each tablet)
- **Percocet** (325 mg or 500 mg of **acetaminophen** with another pain medicine, **oxycodone** in each tablet).

Many other products contain **acetaminophen** (also called **APAP** for its chemical name, especially on prescription labels). Protect yourself from an overdose by reading the labels of all the medicines you take!

### Contact Information



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